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The Spectacle Within: Symbolist Painting and Minimalist Mise-en-Scène

The dominance of spectacle in the nineteenth-century theatre, particularly through melodrama, had any number of critics. Though they were unlikely and ultimately unable to dethrone melodrama (if that was really even the goal), dramatic movements of the latter part of the century attempted to reorient spectators away from the overwhelming visuality and effects-driven appeal of the century's preeminent popular genre toward a closer consideration of content and language.¹ While the avant-garde movements of the mid to late century (in which I am including, for the purposes of this discussion, both naturalism/realism and symbolism) may have been united in rejecting what they saw as the elevation of spectacle above all other aspects of theatre, they agreed on little else. This essay will explore the changing conception of and attitude toward stage scenery and mise-en-scène over the latter half of the nineteenth century, particularly with regard to the symbolist scepticism toward the theatre. I will argue that in their search for a means of escaping the concretising effects of the stage and stage scenery, the symbolists reimagine the purpose of scenery and its relationship to both the dramatic text and the spectator. I will conclude with two examples of collaborations between symbolist playwrights and painters that demonstrate the parameters of this re-conception of the stage and the interaction between the arts in the symbolist theatre. Ultimately, I suggest that the symbolist conception of mise-en-scène was designed to create a paradox in which the spectator's experience of performance was both unique and individual, while at the same time deeply communal.

Mise-en-Scène and Representation

From the earliest days of Western theatre, beginning with the Greeks, stage settings, whether they were simple (by necessity or design) or elaborate, were primarily conceived as

representing the locale in which the action of the play was taking place. In the case of a very general representation, as in the single city or palace setting of the early Renaissance, or an abstraction filled in by dialogue, as in Shakespeare's stage, the setting that appeared as the play's backdrop may have already been seen by the spectator hundreds of times, and indeed may have 'represented' nothing specific at all, but the visual scene behind the actors was nevertheless imagined as the locale in which the drama was enacted. Over the course of the nineteenth century, thanks in large part to advances in theatre technology and structural changes in the business of the stage (such as the rise of the long run), it became possible for stage settings to represent in far more detail and specificity than ever before the exact locales evoked by the playwright. While it is uncertain in some ways which aspects of the changes in theatre are causes and which effects (i.e. the rise of the long run was necessitated by the increased expense and logistical concerns of more elaborate and numerous settings, but at the same time was essential to the growth of such spectacles), it is clear that once these changes were in place, audiences came to expect spectacular scenery and an exact representation of the locale to be depicted.

At the centre of this development was melodrama. While perhaps most famous (in terms of *mise-en-scène*) for its exotic locales, live animals, and special effects where the spectator was to be awed by the otherness and aesthetic beauty of a representation of the unknown or the fantastic, the melodramatic eye for detailed reproduction was also brought to bear in painstaking recreations of scenes intimately known to the present spectator, as in Dion Boucicault's *The Poor of New York*, whose intricately detailed street scenes of New York, as seen in the 1857 production there, were soon adapted to equally detailed local depictions of Liverpool (*The Poor of Liverpool*, 1864) and London (*The Streets of London*, 1864), and several other English cities, after itself having been adapted from the French play *The Poor of Paris*, written in 1856 by Edouard-Louis-Alexandre Brisbarre and Eugene Nus.² The detailed

scenery of melodrama, both in the exotic spectacular extravaganzas and the recreations of relatively ordinary local scenes, was undoubtedly a selling point for the genre and its crowd-pleasing quality may well have been its primary justification. Nevertheless, the rationale behind this scenic splendour may be seen as an extension of the vogue for historical accuracy advanced in the previous century by Garrick and Macklin in England and Voltaire in France. As such, the advances of melodrama may be seen less as revolutionary in concept than a marriage of the already existing conception of stage design to the technological advances that made this more exact and elaborate representation a possibility.

The relationship between the stage and the Romantic movement was a complicated one, particularly in England, where antipathy toward theatrical representation ran high.³ For several of these writers, particularly Lord Byron, this led to a rejection of the stage that manifested in the writing of closet dramas—plays never intended for the stage. In fact, the objections to the stage among the English Romantics would be echoed some years later in very similar terms by the symbolists. This antipathy to the stage was not, however, shared by the French Romantics, and Victor Hugo, in his seminal Preface to *Cromwell*, argued that the playwright's considered decisions of setting were of such significance that the setting itself must be considered a character in the play:

It is beginning to be understood that in our time exact localization is one of the first elements of reality. The speaking or acting characters are not the only things which impress a faithful representation of the facts on the minds of the spectators. The place where this or that catastrophe occurred becomes a terrible and inseparable witness of it; and the absence of silent characters of this sort would make the great scenes of history incomplete in the drama. Would the poet dare assassinate Rizzio anywhere but in the Old Market? . . . decapitate Charles I and Louis XVI anywhere

but in those sinister squares from which Whitehall and the Tuileries can be seen, as if their scaffolds were extensions of the palaces?⁴

Hugo's insistence on 'exact localization [as] one of the first elements of reality' demonstrates clearly both an affinity to melodrama (on which Hugo and the romantics heaped disdain) and an anticipation of realism. It also demonstrates the extent to which, while the romantics may have conceived their scenic spectacle in a more 'artistic' and conceptual light, they were well aware of the extent to which melodrama had already by 1827 cultivated an audience that expected such elaborate stagings in art both high and low, and everywhere in-between.

Nevertheless, Hugo is at pains to argue that the 'local color' he is calling for is quite different from that seen in melodrama: 'Local color should not merely be on the *drame*'s surface, but at its center, in the very heart of the work. . . . The *drame* should be thoroughly impregnated with this period color.'⁵ Thus Hugo denigrates the detailed accuracy of adaptable works, later exemplified by plays such as Boucicault's *Poor of New York/Streets of London*, suggesting that the very adaptability of the piece is indicative of mere surface accuracy and a lack of real interest in the connection between the play and its locale. Still, we must be left to wonder if the differences that Hugo proffers between melodramatic and romantic spectacle are rooted in any actual practical or conceptual considerations, or rather simply a greater ability to theorise (or interest in so doing) such concerns.

As naturalism and realism staked their claim to a revolution in the conception of theatre in the 1870s and 80s, they were faced with a similar quandary as the romantics: how might (and should) they, while vehemently rejecting melodrama as a form beneath contempt, utilise and even exploit the scenic revolution that melodrama had pioneered and popularised? In considering the role of scenery, Émile Zola acknowledges the backlash that had obviously already arisen against such spectacle: 'There are two quite opposite opinions on [sets and props]: one holds that the stage should be kept bare, as in the classical set, the other insists on

an exact reproduction of the environment, however complicated it may be.’⁶ Zola places himself firmly in the latter camp, insisting upon a rationale that emerges not only out of the play’s relationship to its spectators, but on a more internal basis: ‘Accurate scenery . . . immediately establishes a situation, tells us what world we are in, reveals the characters’ habits. And since the actors feel at home there, how convincingly they live the life they have to live!’⁷ Zola thus begins to make the case that the painstakingly detailed accuracy of the realist set (including such details as the books on the shelf, the titles of which the audience might well not even be expected to see), was meant just as much to give the actor a sense of the natural environment in which his character lived as it was for the audience to observe the character in that environment. Still, Zola remains conscious of the critique of scenic spectacle as a mask for mediocre (or worse) writing:

The critic is absolutely right when he says that today sham characters are acting in real sets. . . . The naturalist evolution in the theatre inevitably began with the material aspect, with the exact reproduction of the environment. That, really, was the most accessible approach. The audience could easily be won over. Furthermore, the evolutionary process had been at work for a long time. But sham characters are less easy to transform than wings and backdrops, because it means finding a man of genius. Although the set painters and machinists have sufficed for part of the task, the dramatic authors have yet to do anything more than grope in the dark. And it is amazing that a precisely reproduced setting has sometimes been enough to create a smash hit.⁸

Zola thus concedes naturalism’s debt to melodrama and its continuing influence, even as he paints this as an obvious (if not yet complete) evolution. Though Zola proclaimed his ‘a totally new model’,⁹ to a significant extent, in practice, he and the realists and naturalists merely married the conceptual understanding of setting that had existed since the dawn of

Western theatre (that the set represents the place in which the action of the play occurs) to an economic and technological model of staging developed through melodrama. The system of theatrical production (in the long run and recourse to spectacle) that became possible as a result of melodrama's success permitted a level of specificity in the representation of locale (and in the ability to make set changes on a massive scale, multiple specific locales within the same play) which had been heretofore inconceivable. Whether recreating the slums of Paris (as in *Thérèse Raquin*) or a comfortable bourgeois drawing room (as in Ibsen's high realist works), naturalism and realism utilised the scenic advances provided by melodrama in such a way as to offer their audience a reasonable facsimile of the specificity and spectacle they had come to expect and demand, while at the same time constructing a theoretical model that not only accommodated, but even made a great virtue of such exactitude.

Symbolism and the Stage: An Uncomfortable Relationship

The sceptical attitude of many symbolist writers and artists toward the theatre that surrounded them in the late-nineteenth century arose from no single rationale, but rather from several significant concerns. First among these concerns was a belief that the drama created by the poet had its ideal staging in the poet's mind, and that any attempt to realise this vision onstage was bound to fail. There were two primary reasons behind this. First, the theatre was unlikely ever to be able to realise the specific vision that existed in the mind of the poet, both because of the limitations of the theatre (even in the age of spectacular scenery), and because such visions as the symbolist poets had, ethereal and dream-like as they were, were likely to resist any concrete representation. Secondly, even to the extent that such visions could be realised on the stage, the concreteness that resulted from stage representation denied the spectator an opportunity to realise in their own mind a vision akin to that experienced by the

author. For Maurice Maeterlinck, this problem went beyond the set to include the actors, both of which he saw as interfering with the author's unique genius: 'The stage is where masterpieces die, because the presentation of a masterpiece by *accidental* and *human* means is a contradiction. All masterpieces are symbols, and the symbol never withstands the active presence of man.'¹⁰ Maeterlinck's critique of the actor's influence on the poet's work unquestionably extended to the scenery, as neither was in the control of the poet, whom Maeterlinck thought the only proper artist in the work. The symbolist play in performance ran the risk of leaving the realm of the symbolic, arriving at a materiality and concreteness that robbed the work of its power: 'The mystical density of the art work has disappeared.'¹¹

In rejecting the spectacle and specificity of contemporary *mise-en-scène*, despite the many potential enemies from which they had to choose (including melodrama), the symbolists' strongest ire was reserved for the dramatic genre that stood as the founding enemy against which their movement stood. The basis of the symbolist critique of the realist stage (and indeed, arguably of their entire theoretical model) was not primarily related to the physicality of the stage, but was rather one of metaphysics. The symbolists stood in opposition to realism as a theory of art and of life on the basis that in their insistence upon the painstaking scientific recreation of 'reality', the realists in fact merely produced the surface effects of reality. To focus solely on those aspects of life that could be immediately observed with our senses was to miss a level of spirituality and mysticism that lay beneath. As Daniel Gerould puts it, the reality that the realists claimed to represent was, to the symbolists, 'a veil of fleeting appearances behind which were hidden deeper truths.'¹² If the attempt to understand existence by observing reality in the real world was doomed to failure, then the effort to stage that reality in any meaningful way through reproduction of surface detail was all the more futile. Pierre Quillard, whose theory and practice we will discuss in greater detail in a moment, had little time for naturalism's representation of life:

To give the complete illusion of life, it was thought clever to create scrupulously exact settings, of real murmuring fountains between the courtyard and the garden and of the meat hanging in the butcher's stall. And yet, despite the meticulous care with which it represented the exterior of things, the drama was enigmatic and elusive, and the illusion became entirely pointless. This is because naturalism . . . is the opposite of theatre.¹³

Naturalism thus finds itself attacked from two angles: first, as concerns naturalism's philosophical worldview, that its conception of the nature of existence lacks depth and ultimately is not as 'real' as it purports to be, and secondly, with regard to naturalism as a theatrical art form, that the concern for surface detail in settings left the drama underlying the stage picture bereft of any real texture or meaning.

This last view dovetails with concerns held by many in the period, that the rise (indeed, the dominance) of theatrical spectacle inevitably distracted spectators from what should be the real concerns of the drama—the content and language. Janet Ruth Heller notes the broad-based critique in this regard:

Like the romantics, many Victorian writers insist that elaborate spectacles deaden the audience's imagination. Though late nineteenth-century critics do not object to the performance of tragedy or comedy, they do worry that the creation of beautiful stage pictures has relegated the text and the actors to an unfairly subordinate position.¹⁴

So pervasive was this dominance of surface spectacle that Stéphane Mallarmé believed it endemic and damning to theatrical performance in general: 'A dramatic work shows a succession of exterior aspects of things, without any moment becoming real, and all things considered, without anything happening.'¹⁵ Mallarmé's seeming displeasure with nothing

‘happening’ in the theatre is likely less a concern for a lack of on-stage action (indeed, it would be hard to imagine a genre with less concern for on-stage action than symbolism) than for what he perceives as the inability of a form concerned with such exteriorities to ever be able to reach the viewer on the spiritual level that, for him, is the goal of art.

In light of the compendium of objections to theatre among the symbolists (and the above is not an exhaustive list of those objections), it is unsurprising that a number of symbolist writers saw closet drama as a more appealing option.¹⁶ Maeterlinck, despite becoming the most prominent of the symbolists to write for the stage, remarked that, ‘I think that almost all plays that are not mere stage-carpentry can be better appreciated in reading than on the stage. . . . I always enjoy reading a play far more than I do seeing it acted.’¹⁷ Martin Puchner notes Mallarmé’s contention that ‘the “theatre created by poets” must avoid all the gross contingencies of the theatre and instead should give us an “ideal representation” that cannot take place on a stage’.¹⁸ Despite this clear suspicion of the stage, the symbolists maintained a relationship (if a sometimes tepid one) with the stage and with contemporary theoretical debates as to the significance of and proper approach to theatrical performance.

The Appeal of Performance

What then kept the symbolists from turning solely to the closet for their dramatic output? Countering the above-noted antipathy to the stage were two factors that inspired in many of the symbolists a strong interest in theatrical performance. The first of these was their widespread admiration for Richard Wagner. Wagner’s concept of the *gesamtkunstwerk*—the total work of art—was a significant influence on the symbolists. While it was perhaps the music in particular through which the symbolists saw a possible vehicle for the spiritual experience that they felt was the purpose of art, it was the possibility of the arts in

collaboration, each art performing a unique and necessary role, that fired the symbolist imagination. Théodore de Wyzewa, writing in the symbolist journal, *La Revue Wagnerienne*, defined the end-point of Wagner's theoretical model as 'the fusion of all forms of art in a common intention'.¹⁹ Wyzewa thus envisioned the arts in partnership, and while this might seem to run counter to the collective voices pining for the words of the poet to be dominant over all other aspects of the play, the model of parity proposed here stands in contrast to the dominance of scenic spectacle over poetic dialogue that had become the acknowledged enemy of so many of the nineteenth-century theorists. How to employ such a model of parity and mutual purpose was perhaps another matter, as we will later explore. But the combination of the arts imagined by such a theory necessitates that the work of art be experienced in performance.

The second force driving the symbolists toward, if not theatre, then at least a form of art experienced as a group, rather than individually, was a desire for spiritual communion. Friedrich Nietzsche, in *The Birth of Tragedy*, sees the music in Wagner as assuming the role of the chorus from the Greek theatre. Both Wagner's music and the Greek chorus, Nietzsche argues, have a transformative impact on the individual spectator and the audience as a whole: 'Here we have a surrender of individuality and a way of entering into another character. And this phenomenon is encountered epidemically: a whole throng experiences the magic of this transformation.'²⁰ Russian symbolist theorist Vyacheslov Ivanov, heavily influenced by Nietzsche, would later remark, 'The crowd of spectators must fuse into a choral body, like the mystical community of ancient "orgies" and "mysteries".'²¹ The quest for spiritual experience in art, though not impossible for the individual reader, thus gains the element of collectivity, and the auditorium has the potential to become 'a theatre temple in which the audience would participate as celebrants in a sacred rite'.²² Once such a crowd of spectators/celebrants is gathered, there is little question of whether or not there will be a

performance. But if the symbolists were to have a theatre, what would it look like, and how would it differentiate itself from the types of theatre that they so vehemently rejected? Some preliminary insight into these questions may be answered by looking at symbolist attitudes toward the performance of the work of William Shakespeare.

Shakespeare, Our Set Designer

As was so often the case in nineteenth-century dramatic theory, the figure of William Shakespeare stood at the centre of symbolist debate about the proper role and scale of scenery. The notion that Shakespeare was better read than performed had gained currency through the romantics, with Goethe ('Shakespeare ad Infinitum'), Madame de Stael (*On Germany*), and Charles Lamb ('On the Tragedies of Shakespeare') among a number of romantic critics arguing that Shakespeare was either impossible to successfully stage, or was simply more profitably enjoyed by the reader than the spectator. This critique was eagerly picked up by the symbolists, and their attitude toward Shakespeare in performance is in many ways a proxy for their approach to the role of the stage in their own oeuvre. Mallarmé famously saw *Hamlet* as mental drama. Maeterlinck goes so far as to pronounce that 'Lear, Hamlet, Othello, Macbeth, Anthony and Cleopatra cannot be represented, and it is dangerous to see them on the stage. Something of Hamlet died for us the day we saw him die on stage.'²³

In 'Lettre sur le Monodrame', an essay published in 1887 with his prose play *Le Juré*, the Belgian lawyer, symbolist art patron, writer, and theorist Edmond Picard presents a critique of Shakespeare on stage that lays the fault not with the plays themselves, but with the contemporary theatre which presented them (with, he suggests, little success). Picard argues that the problem with performing Shakespeare on the contemporary stage (particularly,

considering the legacy of neo-classicism, the French-language stage) is that the frequent changes of time and place in Shakespeare are at odds with a conception of the theatre that demands specific and elaborate representations of each aspect of the scene. Since such frequent changes are either impossible to produce with a level of detail that is the expectation of contemporary audiences, or when attempted, are by dint of this fact shoddily done, Picard ultimately asserts that ‘these great masterpieces of dramatic art, far superior to anything presented today, are simply no longer playable unless subjected to a sacrilegious mutilation’.²⁴ The success of Shakespeare in his time, Picard argues, rested on the fact that, unlike the contemporary theatre’s obsession with detailed realistic sets, ‘the material scene . . . was a useless accessory. . . . sets were despised’ (v). Instead, Shakespeare’s theatre worked by activating the creative faculties of his audience: ‘For the great poet and his era, it was the rule to call forth the imagination of spectators with descriptions of great moments, often violent, even shocking, in the dialogue of the characters in the scene’ (v). It is this invocation of the spectator’s own imagination that is to form the basis of Picard’s theory. In presenting his perspective on Shakespeare, he notes that rather than rejecting the concept of theatre in general, he is instead seeking to ‘to free Shakespeare from being something that is best experienced through the act of reading him on one’s own’ (vi). Picard’s contrast between the scenery-free stage of the Elizabethan era and the counter-productive (as he sees it) obsession with detailed settings of the late-nineteenth-century stage is meant not only to suggest an alternative model for performing Shakespeare, but also as the basis for a reimagining of the theatre in general.

Edmond Picard’s Monodrama and the Performance of *Le Juré*

Picard's analysis of the failings of the contemporary stage in producing Shakespeare is the opening gambit in an essay offering a reconception of the stage in accordance with the rejection of scenic spectacle. Picard begins the essay by excoriating all current forms of theatre and public speaking formats, arguing they are in desperate need of renovation (the essay would reappear ten years later in a collection entitled *Discourse sur le renouveau au Théâtre*). Picard proposes a new type of theatre, which he calls 'monodrama', with a single person (preferably the author himself) taking the stage and reading the entirety of the play, including stage directions. This reader/performer would modify their tone and speech just enough to differentiate characters and stage directions, 'incisively creating a tableau in the minds of the listeners, with an intensity that transports them to the place where they need to be' (vii). It would be, in Picard's words, an 'action which develops in the scenery evoked by the imagination' (vii).

Picard suggests that 'a continuous stream of poignant music may sometimes be used to support and augment the emotional impact of the piece' (ix-x), and indeed, attached to *Le Juré* was a list of music to accompany each scene, including works by Beethoven, Bach, and Schumann. He says little, however, about scenery, other than noting that 'The scenery normally presented silently on the stage will be created through language' (ix). And yet, the year before *Le Juré* (and the essay) were published, Picard had already approached the Belgian symbolist artist Odilon Redon to produce a series of images that would appear both in the published version of the play as well as appearing behind the author as he gave a performance of *Le Juré* in accordance with his theory. Redon agreed to the proposal, but because he refused to copy his own work (for the book, he would have had to make smaller reproductions of the lithographs made for the performance), he offered to make six large charcoal drawings for the performance, as well as creating six additional smaller lithographs for the book. Redon noted however that 'these lithographs would not be close reproductions

of the drawings but individual variants of the same theme'.²⁵ On 19 February 1887, at the annual exhibition of Les XX, a group of symbolist artists in Brussels, Picard read *Le Juré* in accordance with his theory, with Redon's six drawings displayed prominently on the stage.

The relationship between the drawings, the text of the play, and the performance is intriguing for a number of reasons, especially in terms of a consideration of how the audience might have read the two together. Picard's 'play', written entirely in prose, is an account of a juror, Pierre Labalestrier, who, haunted by his vote of guilty (and his effort to convince others on the jury to come to the same conclusion) and the resulting execution of a man convicted of murder, ultimately is driven insane and commits suicide. The play is written in the third-person, but clearly reflects the psyche of the protagonist. Picard sent Redon a copy of the manuscript in Autumn 1886, with no instructions other than the number of images to be produced and the method to be employed. Dario Gamboni suggests that Redon 'selected from the text certain passages or phrases that allowed him to return to his own motifs and either recycle existing drawings or reproduce variants of them'.²⁶ The relationship between the images and the text is arguably a loose one. Jules Destrée, the art critic who catalogued Redon's work, wrote in his 1891 catalogue of the difficulty of defining the relationship between the two, noting that neither 'illustration', nor 'interpretation' really sufficed, but that ultimately:

The truth is that even if Redon appears to put himself at the service of some phrase or other from the work on which his pencil comments, he expresses neither its letter nor its spirit; and most of the time his plates have only a very remote and very artificial relationship with the text they point to.²⁷

Gamboni further notes Destrée's suggestion that the images 'can only be fully appreciated by being separated from the captions taken from Picard's text; the viewer needs to forget what

the images “seem inclined to represent”²⁸ When the similar lithographs appeared in the book version, the images did not appear next to the passage of text they theoretically ‘illustrated’, but rather in between scenes. Gamboni even goes so far as to suggest that the relationship between author and artist may have been one of mutual inspiration: ‘Redon’s art itself counted among the sources of inspiration for *Le Juré*.’²⁹ The reciprocal influence between the two men may suggest the sort of partnership between the arts that Wyzewa envisioned for the symbolist theatre. It is also likely that rather than seeking ‘illustrations’ for his performance, Picard desired dark, macabre images that would move the spectator to the particular state of mind or mood that he believed the play required, a concept that would emerge in later symbolist theory.

Symbolist Painting and Mise-en-Scène

As Picard’s theory suggests, the symbolist approach to staging was concerned with negotiating the space between the contemplative experience of the reader in his or her own home, and the excesses of nineteenth-century theatrical spectacle. The gap between these obviously left them with a great deal of room in which to operate, but this does not mean that they found it easy to negotiate the conflicting forces pulling them toward and away from the stage.

The theory and practice of symbolist theatre found its prime laboratory in two Paris theatres: Paul Fort’s Théâtre d’Art (1890-1892) and Aurelien Lugné-Poe’s Théâtre de l’Oeuvre (1893-1897). While the style of production at both theatres seems to have been variable, with some productions seeming close to imitations of typical bourgeois theatre, there were several significant innovations representing what might be called a symbolist stage aesthetic. From the beginning the collaboration between the poets who were to make up the repertoire of these theatres and the leading painters of the symbolist movement was a major

aspect of symbolist theatre. On 30 January 1891, two months after the Théâtre d'Art's first production, Paul Fort announced that events at the theatre would conclude with a three-minute tableau vivant recreating a new symbolist painting that had not yet been publicly shown. In keeping with the concept of appealing to all the senses, the tableaux would be accompanied by 'scenic music and perfumed scents'.³⁰ These tableaux never did become a regular part of the programme at the Théâtre d'Art, but major symbolist painters such as Emile Bernard, Maurice Denis, Paul Bonnard, Paul Ranson, Eduard Vuillard, and, as we will soon discuss, Paul Sérusier were all employed by the theatre to design both sets and programmes. Often, the settings executed by the symbolist painters were no less representational of the setting in which the play was meant to take place than any conventional production. But in several cases the image that appeared as a backdrop for the performance stood in a more complex relationship to the play, a relationship at least in some ways akin to that between *Le Juré* and Redon's drawings.

Perhaps the most famous of these cases was the production of Pierre Quillard's play, *La Fille aux mains coupées* (*The Girl With Cut-Off Hands*), which premiered at the Théâtre d'Art on 19 March 1891. The play is written in a mixture of flowery verse speeches and prose, which elaborately sets scenes and describes the minimal action consisting of a girl seeking communion with Jesus while her castle is under attack (though this makes the play sound far more active than it actually is).. As Frantisek Deak describes, the set 'consisted of a single backdrop of shining gold, framed with red draperies. On this golden canvas Paul Sérusier . . . painted in an iconlike style multicolored angels with open wings, kneeling in prayer.'³¹ Quillard's play, and the reaction to it, occasioned one of the more famous statements on the symbolist approach to staging, and their rejection of stage spectacle.

Quillard's four-page essay, 'De l'Inutilité Absolue de la Mise en Scène Exacte' ('On the Utter Pointlessness of Exact Staging'), appeared in the May 1891 issue of the *Revue d'Art*

Dramatique and was a direct response to a review of his play. In the review in question, which appeared in the April issue of that same publication, Pierre Véber describes the performance as follows:

A complete simplification of the dramatic medium. A narrator, placed in the corner of the proscenium, reveals the scene, the set and the action. The greater part of this is given through the lyrical text. The theatre disappears almost completely, giving way to a dialogic declamation, a sort of poetic décor.³²

Véber mentions Sérusier's involvement only in passing. Quillard did not dispute the details of Véber's account in any way, but felt that the reviewer had missed the point of his play, insisting that 'the mise-en-scène by necessity depends upon the dramatic system being adopted'.³³ Quillard goes on to cite the work of Aeschylus and Shakespeare, noting that in the theatres for which these great authors laboured, 'the word creates the décor, like all the rest' (181). Quillard notes that if the playwright calls for 'a marvellous palace' (181), for example, the image that we each conjure in our minds will dwarf the paltry creation of the theatre's scene designer. 'Far from aiding the free play of the imagination,' Quillard suggests, 'painted canvas only does it harm' (181).

In place of painted canvas, Quillard once again focuses on language as a means of creating décor: '*The set should be a pure ornamental fiction which completes the illusion through analogies of color and lines with the play. . . . And theatre will be what it should be: a pretext for a dream*' (181-2; Quillard's italics). Sérusier's painting of the three angels in prayer was unquestionably related to the play, in which the young female protagonist is seen in prayer on several occasions, but in no way could be said to represent either a setting for the events which occur, nor a direct representation of the events themselves. In Deak's words: 'The artist invents a visual equivalent to what he considers to be the essence of the play.'

Deak notes that ‘This single backdrop décor of a symbolist painting was greeted by bravos from the spectators, as it brought symbolist painting into the theatre for the first time and also marked the invention of symbolist stage design.’³⁴

The similarities between *Le Juré* and *La Fille aux mains coupées* are striking, as are the theoretical statements made by Picard and Quillard. While Quillard’s play, unlike Picard’s, has actors performing the individuated roles, the introduction of the narrator, standing at a lectern stage left, and the fact that the verse passages were ‘declaimed in monotonous, unexpressive voices by actors behind the gauze scrim’,³⁵ suggests a significant level of conceptual kinship between the plays. This does tend to render Deak’s pronouncement as to Quillard and Sérusier’s claim to ‘the invention of symbolist stage design’ somewhat questionable, considering that it came some four years after Picard and Redon’s work (Deak makes no mention of Picard in *Symbolist Theater*). Regardless of this question of precedence, the point here is that the relationship between text and image is in both cases one of analogy. The image neither directly illustrates an aspect of the play nor, as had historically been the case, could the image or its contents be presumed to exist in the dramatic world in which the events took place.

The Image and the Play: Final Thoughts

What then can we say of the purpose and meaning behind these symbolist experiments in painting, minimalist setting, and theatre? To begin to answer this, I will return briefly to Wagner’s theory of the *gesamtkunstwerk*. Despite their avowed admiration for Wagner, two factors made the adaptation of his theories to symbolist poetics problematic. First, although the symbolists found Wagner infinitely more refined and intellectual than the spectacles of the bourgeois theatre, they could not deny that the productions in accordance with Wagner’s

theory (including his own operas) had an overwhelming effect on the spectator, not unlike the spectacle-based theatre that symbolism reacted against. Mallarmé opined that the spectator of Wagner had to ‘submit to a sorcery’ which had the effect of ‘violat[ing] your reason, so taken by a simulacrum’.³⁶ The theatrical illusion is thus so comprehensive that the spectator is permitted no role other than a passive and complete immersion in the act of spectatorship. The second issue was that although they sought the integration of all the arts in the theatre, the symbolists soon came to the conclusion that the only person capable of accomplishing such an integration of the arts successfully was Wagner himself.³⁷ In response to this problem, Edouard Dujardin offered a solution consisting of a separation of the arts. In such a conception various art forms might appear together in the same work of art, but instead of a seamless integration of these forms, each maintains a degree of independence, with meaning produced by the differing, but perhaps analogous, responses produced in the spectator by each of the different forms. A separation of the art forms within the work was also a solution offered by Mallarmé in response to the problem of Wagner’s overwhelming illusionism.³⁸

Music was, of course, central to any Wagnerian conception of theatre. Charles Baudelaire suggested that ‘the more eloquent the music, the more swift and true its suggestiveness, the greater the chance that sensitive persons will conceive ideas in harmony with those that inspired the artist.’³⁹ Similarly, Mallarmé believed that spectators of Wagner’s operas, ‘due to the beneficial influence of music, will receive a suggestion of reality without the intellectual despotism of ordinary theater that asks its audience to believe in the reality of its representation’.⁴⁰ Baudelaire and Mallarmé here both refer to the power of music to create a space in which the spectator may reach a sort of harmony with the intentions of the artist. This is clearly the sort of idea that Quillard has in mind when he proposes that ‘The spectator . . . will give himself fully to the will of the poet, and will see, in accordance with his soul, terrible and charming shapes and dream worlds which nobody but he will inhabit.’⁴¹

Interestingly, in 1910, twenty-three years after its initial publication and performance, Picard republished *Le Juré*, which was now accompanied by music composed by Henri Thiébaut. Along with the reworked play, Picard published an updated version of his theoretical statement, now called ‘Le Monodrame Lyrique Parlé’, which, now including a significant section on music, nearly doubled in size. Picard argues that, ‘a certain number of works—relatively few, however—can attest to the power of the considerable effect which may result from the combination of the “spoken word” and music, uniting and reinforcing each other’.⁴² He goes on to denigrate the role of music in romantic works such as Schumann’s *Manfred*, noting that the purpose of the music in such works ‘is merely descriptive, or is destined to strengthen the general impression, or to accentuate a stage effect, or to comment on a tirade’, whereas in the new version of *Le Juré*, the music ‘analyses characters psychologically, so to speak, identifies itself with them, exteriorises their interior impressions’.⁴³ Picard still makes no mention of Redon’s drawings, however.

I would suggest that Picard and Quillard imagine the visual image playing a role analogous to that envisioned for music—setting a mood and offering a guide (but not a prescriptive one) to spectator response. In this, the symbolists offer something very new in their conception of the role of scenery on stage. Here, we have for the first time an art of scenic representation in which the things represented do not necessarily accord directly to the diegetic world of the play. We are not obliged to believe (indeed, we are likely not meant to believe at all) that the scene we are seeing before us is actually taking place in a room in which these images also exist. And in forcing the audience to contemplate two artistic works both separately and as one, the symbolists exploit the tendency of the human mind to form a narrative out of disparate elements when presented together.

In this, the symbolists invoke a remarkable paradox. Brecht’s twentieth-century critique of realist dramaturgy rested partially on his concern that the ‘reality’ created in part

by the painstaking recreation of what the symbolists would consider a ‘surface reality’ lulled the spectator into complete immersion in the world of the play, hypnotised as though by magic, an assessment not dissimilar from Mallarmé’s concerns about Wagner. The symbolists shared Brecht’s concern that this process dulled the spectator’s ability to interact with the work. But while the action Brecht sought in his spectators was one of critical distance and political activism, the symbolists sought the spectator’s participation and collaboration in creating the magical dream-like world in which they were to become immersed. The symbolists were opposed to the spectacle of melodrama and the detailed accuracy of realism at least in part because the illusions they created were already so complete in themselves that they erected a barrier to the viewer’s participation in an act of communal creation.

Surprisingly, the formation of communal reception was cited as an aim by one of the foremost melodramatists of the era, Dion Boucicault. Boucicault, using language that would sound not at all out of place coming from the pen of one of the symbolists, passionately rejects limitations on ‘the liberty of imagination’, and asserts that the goal of theatrical performance is ‘to establish perfectly the theatrical illusion in the mind of the spectator’.⁴⁴ Again, Boucicault seems to be in accord with the symbolists when he writes (in 1889, two years after the first performance of *Le Juré*) that the goal of the dramatist must be to: ‘fuse all listening minds into one—to make all hearts beat as one; and, as he leads them to beat, to bring them irresistibly into one current of sympathy’.⁴⁵ However, unlike the symbolists, Boucicault’s creation of a communal audience necessitates the rejection of the spectator as individual; the playwright’s art is to ‘deprive them of their separate individualities’.⁴⁶ This goal of unindividuated communality is greatly enhanced by the *mise-en-scène* of Boucicault’s theatre. The dramatic world shared by the collected spectators is presented as a total (or at least as total as possible) illusion, providing a complete visual representation of

the world of the characters—the spectator need contribute nothing but his or her willingness to accept the illusion.

Conversely, the symbolist theatre discussed here enacts a complex negotiation between the creation of a spectatorial unity and a fundamentally personal interaction with the work of art. By jettisoning the concrete physicality and imagery of a *mise-en-scène* created not by the artist-writer, but by set designers, Picard and Quillard call for the realisation of a unique vision in the mind of each and every spectator. No, we will not each see the same image in our individual minds, but we will, each of us, see our personal ideal of what the author calls to our minds, and as such, we may more closely approximate the ideal that existed in the mind of the artist far better than any set designer could ever realise. We each see a completely different vision, and yet each of these visions corresponds directly to that which the author had in mind. The images provided by Redon and Sérusier suffice to fire the imagination of the spectator toward a certain aesthetic or mood, but not to fully occupy the ‘mind’s eye’, or to prevent that spectator from actively constructing the scene in his or her mind. The result is a theatre that is intensely personal and yet, simultaneously, an act of spiritual communion with both the assembled audience and the author from whose mind the vision was produced.

¹ This assessment, either from the perspective of these late nineteenth-century genres, or later critics assessing these trends, likely significantly underestimates the extent to which audiences of melodrama were, in fact, interested in both the spectacle *and* the content of the melodramas. Peter Brooks, in particular, has made a very strong argument to this effect. See Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976).

² ‘Dion Boucicault Collections: *The Streets of London/The Poor of New York*’, *University of Kent*, <http://www.kent.ac.uk/library/specialcollections/theatre/boucicault/plays/streets.html> [Accessed 14 November 2012].

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- ³ It is worth noting that Jeffrey N. Cox has argued that the anti-theatricalism of the English Romantics has, to some extent, been over-emphasised. See Cox, 'Spots of Time: The Structure of the Dramatic Evening in the Theater of Romanticism', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 41.4 (1999): 403-425.
- ⁴ Victor Hugo, 'Preface to *Cromwell*' in *Theatre/Theory/Theatre*, Daniel Gerould, ed. (New York: Applause Books, 2000), p. 309.
- ⁵ Ibid., p. 313.
- ⁶ Émile Zola, 'Naturalism in the Theatre' in *Theatre/Theory/Theatre*, Daniel Gerould, ed. (New York: Applause Books, 2000), p. 358.
- ⁷ Ibid., p. 360.
- ⁸ Ibid., p. 361.
- ⁹ Ibid., p. 360.
- ¹⁰ Maurice Maeterlinck, 'Small Talk—The Theatre', in *Symbolist Art Theories: A Critical Anthology*, Henri Dorra, ed. and trans. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), p. 145. [Maeterlinck's italics.]
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² Daniel Gerould, 'The Art of Symbolist Drama: A Re-Assessment' in *Symbolist Drama*, Daniel Gerould, ed. (New York: PAJ Publications, 1995), p. 7.
- ¹³ Pierre Quillard, 'De l'Inutilité Absolue de la Mise en Scène Exacte', *Revue d'Art Dramatique* (May 1891 in Tome XII, April-June 1891), pp. 180-183 (pp. 180-181). (Translation by author.)
- ¹⁴ Janet Ruth Heller, *Coleridge, Lamb, Hazlitt, and the Reader of Drama* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1990), p. 135.
- ¹⁵ Stéphane Mallarmé, quoted in Frantisek Deak, *Symbolist Theater: The Formation of an Avant-Garde* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), p. 23.
- ¹⁶ In previous work, I have discussed in detail the tendency toward closet drama amongst the symbolists and the English romantic poets. See Kurt Taroff, 'Screens, Closets, and Echo Chambers of the Mind: The Struggle to Represent the Inner Life on Stage', *Forum Modernes Theater* 25.2 (2011), pp. 65-80.
- ¹⁷ Maeterlinck, quoted in Jonas Barrish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), p. 339.
- ¹⁸ Martin Puchner, *Stage Fright: Modernism, Anti-Theatricality, and Drama* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), p. 61.
- ¹⁹ Wyzewa, quoted in Deak, p. 101.

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- ²⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* in *The Birth of Tragedy and The Case of Wagner*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), p. 64. [Italics are Nietzsche's.]
- ²¹ Ivanov, quoted in Gerould, 'The Art of Symbolist Drama', p. 26.
- ²² Gerould, 'The Art of Symbolist Drama', p. 26.
- ²³ Maeterlinck, 'Small Talk—The Theater', p. 145.
- ²⁴ Edmond Picard, 'Le Monodrame', in *Le Juré; Monodrame en cinq actes* (Brussels: Ferdinand Larcier, 1904), p. iv. (Translation by author ; parenthetical references will refer to this text.)
- ²⁵ Ted Gott, *The Enchanted Stone: The Graphic Worlds of Odilon Redon* (Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria, 1990), p. 37.
- ²⁶ Dario Gamboni, *The Brush and the Pen: Odilon Redon and Literature*, Mary Whittall, trans. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), p. 228.
- ²⁷ Jules Destrée, quoted in Gamboni, pp. 227-228.
- ²⁸ Gamboni, pp. 229-230.
- ²⁹ Ibid., p. 232.
- ³⁰ Paul Fort, quoted in Deak, p. 142.
- ³¹ Deak, p. 142.
- ³² Pierre Véber, 'Au Théâtre d'Art', *Revue d'Art Dramatique* (April 1891 in Tome XII, April-June 1891), pp. 115-117 (p. 117). (Translation by author.)
- ³³ Quillard, p. 180. (Parenthetical references will refer to this text.)
- ³⁴ Deak, pp. 142-143.
- ³⁵ Ibid., p. 143.
- ³⁶ Mallarmé, quoted in Puchner, p. 72.
- ³⁷ Deak, p. 101.
- ³⁸ Mallarmé, quoted in Puchner, p. 72.
- ³⁹ Baudelaire, quoted in Deak, p. 98.
- ⁴⁰ Mallarmé, quoted in Deak, p. 103.
- ⁴¹ Quillard, p. 182.
- ⁴² Edmond Picard, 'Le Monodrame lyrique parlé' in Edmond Picard and Henri Thiébaut, *Le Juré: Monodrame Lyrique Parlé en cinq actes* (Paris: Rouart-Lerolle, 1910), p. v. (Translation by author.)
- ⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Dion Boucicault, quoted in A. Cleveland Harrison, 'Boucicault's Formula: Illusion Equals Pleasure', *Educational Theatre Journal* 21.3 (Oct. 1969), pp. 299-309 (p. 303).

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 306.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

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